

## IMMIGRATION AND THE RE-MAKING OF THE UNITED STATES WORKING CLASS

Time and again, immigrants have played central roles in the re-making of the United States working class. Often, their arrival coincided with important changes in the central dynamics and institutions of the economy, and their presence had a major historical significance. Today – the past 20 years or so – is but the latest chapter in this story.

In the 1840s and 1850s, as the industrial revolution was getting off the ground, millions of new immigrants arrived, mostly from Ireland and Germany. They came for different reasons – the Irish were peasant farmers whose way of life was collapsing under British colonialism and an insect infestation of potato agriculture; the Germans were urban artisans and intellectuals who had tried to overthrow their dictatorial government – and they spoke different languages, worshipped different religions, and sought different kinds of jobs and communities here. But they all came to work, and they all became part of the country's working class. Later, in the 1800s, they and their children became part of the country's emerging labor movement, leading the fight for an eight hour day.

Between 1880 and World War I, millions of men and women from other parts of Europe – Italy, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Finland, Greece, Russia, and many other places – came for similar reasons and had similar experiences. Many had been farmers who had lost the ability to support their families as imported food products swamped their markets; some had participated in political movements to overthrow oppressive governments. They spoke many languages and worshipped diverse religions. But they all came to work in the US's new industries – coal mines, steel mines, meatpacking plants, auto factories – and they, too, became part of the country's working class. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, these immigrants and their children, along with African Americans who had migrated from the rural South to the factories of the northern cities, led the struggle to win union recognition, to raise wages, and to gain benefits like pensions and health insurance. They also sought to bring justice into the workplace by establishing grievance procedures and the right to be represented by a shop steward, and by negotiating job descriptions and work rules. Through these new unions (twelve million workers joined between 1934 and 1945!), workers also pressed for new government intervention in the economy, such as job creation programs, and for the protection of all workers' rights.

Today's immigrants and their children are part of a third great wave which began with the reform of the United States' fundamental immigration laws in 1965. Pressured by the civil rights movement and the California-based United

Farm Workers of America, the government ended the "bracero" program (which had brought Mexican farm workers into the US with no rights, except the right to work for substandard wages) and opened our doors wider to immigrants from Latin and South America, Asia, and Africa. By the early 1990s one million new immigrants (many of whom were fleeing civil wars, despotic governments, or agricultural sectors which had collapsed when globalization and free trade undermined their products) arrived in the US each and every year. Many of them sought jobs in the rapidly expanding service sector of the economy, cleaning buildings, serving meals, and providing health care services. While some were able to take advantage of the more liberal post-1965 immigration rules, many of them still found the doors to legal immigration barred and blocked. Desperate to support their families, millions came anyway. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, government officials estimated there were 12 million undocumented immigrants working in the United States.

Like those immigrants who preceded them in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these new immigrants and their children have not only become part of the US working class, but they have also contributed to the revival and transformation of the labor movement. Many of them bring political and organizing experience developed in their home countries. In the 1990s the slogan of "justice for janitors" became an important part of the vision of a revived labor movement for all workers. In the last decade, immigrant "freedom rides" connected to the history of the civil rights movement, while immigrant rights marches on May Day energized that holiday from Los Angeles to New York City. As the US labor movement struggles to redefine itself in the global economy and the current "Great Recession," immigrant workers are playing a central role. They are not only part of history; they are an important part of the future.

*!Si se pueden*

*Yes We Can!*

*Ha Wankarnaal*